

Multiage Learning Environments Have Many Benefits

By Marion Leier

Multiage classes offer students more than an academic education; they provide an environment wherein students develop leadership, increased self-esteem and self-discipline.

"Researchers generally agree that students in multi-grade classes tended to be higher or better than those in single-grade classes in the following affective areas: study habits, social interaction, self-motivation, co-operation, and attitudes toward school."

Gajadharsingh, '91

The obvious diversity of students within the class frees each student to become comfortable with their own individuality, to establish their own pace of achievement and to view themselves as capable learners.

Why is this important?

Most children have a strong desire to 'fit in' with their classmates – so much that they may modify their behavior or their academic performance to mask their 'different-ness'. This could be when highly capable students may give minimum effort in their school work or when frustrated students act out in class to prevent others from realizing that they are struggling with the work. When students are placed in a class with same-age peers, they are faced with a normative pressure of what they perceive is expected of a student their age. This can have a negative affect on their learning, social skills and self-concept.

A multiage class de-emphasizes age and competition. An effective multiage program is based on the needs of the students; therefore, gifted children are provided challenge while the slower paced students receive reinforcement. Students are given opportunity to monitor progress of their proficiency as learners. This enables each student to formulate specific goals to help them move closer to the expected outcomes.

How does the older age group benefit?

The most interesting phenomenon that I have come to know as a teacher and a parent is that the *oldest* group in a multiage class benefits the most! The "senior students" in a multiage program are given more opportunities for leadership and they flourish with this responsibility and boost to their self-esteem. They love opportunities to share their talents and their knowledge. At the same time, older(est) children reflect on their own progress when they notice their younger classmates' work and work habits. Recognizing their learning progress is empowering for students.

Older children are readily accepted as class leaders by their classmates simply because they are older; younger children know that their turn is coming another year. There is not the struggle for dominance that is present in same-age groups. Because children respond differently to younger peers, older children develop a sense of empathy and social maturity that contributes to a positive class community.

Staying with the same teacher for more than one year gives a student a stronger sense of security and direction in their learning. They understand what is expected of them and because of the stronger bond of trust established with their teacher, will work harder to produce high quality work. When a teacher is fortunate enough to work with students for more than a year, there is adequate time for the teacher to learn about how each individual student learns best. There is time to plan specific support and extensions based on daily observations and assessments over time. There is also adequate time for parents and teacher to develop strong relationships as “partners” in the education of their children. It is a natural outcome that a teacher will invest more effort into supporting students with whom she anticipates continuing the following year. This really is a “win-win” situation for all involved.

That is not to say that the younger children do not benefit – they do too. They have in-class mentors to help guide them and help them become comfortable with the class and school environment. Academically advanced younger students have opportunity to work with older students at a similar achievement level. Younger students feel more confident on the playground under the “protection” of older, more experienced classmates.

Are there any benefits for the teacher?

Multiage teachers experience heightened job satisfaction. They develop stronger, more trusting relationships with their students and parents because they work with students for more than one year. Only a portion of the class is new to the teacher each year, which allows for a more manageable assessment period in the new school year. Multiage teachers become skilled at managing dynamic, flexible groupings for instruction and offer students choices in their independent work. When children feel respected and are learning at their own achievement level, they are more likely to be cooperative and purposeful. Multiage classes have fewer discipline problems than same-age classes.

How does it work?

The cooperative, nurturing atmosphere of the multiage class supports and includes each student. Younger students benefit from the modeling and support of their older classmates. They gain a sense of what challenges are ahead as they can “eavesdrop” on activities at more advanced levels; and observe how their older classmates approach these tasks.

That does not mean that the higher level of activities would be reserved for the older group in class. High achieving students in the younger age group have opportunity to work alongside older students who are assessed to be at similar achievement levels in specific learning areas. Older students who require more time on specific concepts have opportunity to join an instructional group at the introductory level.

For example, a child may have a strong aptitude in mathematics and have acquired an early understanding of place value. The teacher would ensure that this student would be grouped with students at a similar level of understanding for instruction to develop this

concept further; while other groups of students work on activities that introduce the concept of place value.

In the same class, there may be older students that need the concept of place value reinforced at the basic level. They could work with a group of younger students for a day or two (or longer, if needed) until place value makes sense to them.

Students are not seated or instructed according to grade level; they have opportunity to learn in a variety of groups based on reasons such as similar achievement, interest, mixed ability, friendship or random selection. This prevents students from developing a limited view of their own or classmates' capabilities. Flexible grouping contributes to a cooperative learning environment and positive socio-emotional development.

Can a single-age class be taught the same way?

A teacher of a single-age class can use the same teaching strategies as a multiage teacher; but will not likely achieve the same degree of learner-centeredness. The social structure of a multiage class significantly enhances the learning environment, providing a more compatible 'fit' with learner-centered teaching strategies (differentiated instruction, integrated content, authentic assessment, brain-based learning, choice, project-based learning, etc)

The factors that are unique to a multiage class are:

1. mixed-age group of students
2. transition of class position (novice to mentor)
3. longer relationship with the teacher

The benefits resulting from a multiage structure impact on how a teacher will respond to the class; how a student relates to classmates and the teacher, how a student views himself as a learner and community member, and ultimately, how a student achieves their goals.

Summary of benefits of multiage

Benefits for students

- Learner-centered
- Positive, nurturing environment
- Peer support, mentoring
- Opportunities for leadership
- Individual pace for learning
- Small group skill instruction
- Longer time with teacher
- Increased self-esteem, confidence

Benefits for parents

- Stronger relationship with teacher
- More opportunities to take an active role in child's education

- Child is more positive about school
- Child is given appropriate support/challenge depending on their individual achievement level
- Child learns to be pro-social, independent and responsible
- Child learns to self initiate

Benefits for educators

- Stronger relationship with students and parents
- Better able to address individual student needs
- Longer time to monitor students to recognize effectiveness of teaching
- More stimulating, creative work environment
- More job satisfaction
- “pushes” teacher to use differentiated instruction and to perform at a high level of teaching
- fewer discipline problems in class
- allows staff more options for placement of high maintenance students and/or difficult combinations of students

Decisions That Will Diminish Benefits

It takes time to develop a successful authentic multiage program. It is important that a school community – administration, parents and teachers - have a clear vision and understanding about the kind of learner-centered program they are developing. This will ensure that appropriate decisions will be made during implementation of multiage classes. Decisions that are not based on learner-centered principles will likely diminish the benefits that are possible with multiage education.

Offering multiage classes only as an administrative solution.

Many schools have combined classes when faced with an imbalance of age groups. A temporary measure to resolve the problem would be to form a split class and attempt to cover the curriculum for each grade in one year. This tends to be an unfair situation for the teacher and students and many school communities try to avoid it if possible. A long-term, educationally sound approach would be for a staff to start researching and discussing the philosophical principles of multiage education to consider possible implementation.

A common mistake is to assign a split class to the most inexperienced teacher, or to have different staff members “take a turn” with a split class. This prevents the continuity of teacher-student relationship for a second or third year. It demonstrates the negative attitudes a school staff might have about the class and infers that the combined class will be discontinued as soon as the enrollment numbers allow segregated graded classes again. Managing multiage classes requires a teacher to be knowledgeable about developmental stages of learning, be familiar with the curriculum guides, and have a repertoire of strategies for differentiated instruction and authentic assessment. Therefore, it is recommended that administrators offer the multiage class to one of the experienced teachers on staff.

Denying students the opportunity to complete a multiage program as the “olders”.

Many parents and educators learning about multiage classes assume that there is more of an advantage for children in the younger(est) age group of a multiage class than there is for the older students. The belief is that younger children would have more opportunity for challenge when working with older classmates, while older children could be short-changed when younger students are in the same class. This view would have more substance if the teacher was over-using whole-class instruction, or trying to juggle segregated graded curriculum.

In a multiage class, the teacher is constantly assessing and monitoring the students in relation to developmental learning stages. She uses this information in order to design appropriate level instruction and organize student learning groups. In this kind of classroom, students' achievement level is more of a determinant for challenging work, than are the students' ages.

It is not until the students experience being the older(est) group of a multiage class that they reap the full extent of benefits. This is when they consolidate their learning and develop leadership skills. It is empowering for children to have classmates emulate them. It emphasizes that they are capable and have something to contribute to a learning community. If children view themselves as capable learners, it increases the likelihood that they will become self-motivated and take initiative in their learning. Senior multiage students develop a sense of nurturer and mentor toward their younger classmates. This experience helps the older children become pro-social and compassionate class members.

Multiage For Information Age

Considering that we have now moved into the Information Age in our global society, it makes sense that our education system should be re-vamped from the traditional graded system designed for the Factory Age. Information is the new economy of power, and our children must acquire, analyze, and communicate information quickly and efficiently. In addition, they need to develop strong emotional and social skills in order to cope with change and diversity.

The benefit of multiage education is that it gives school communities a viable model of schooling reflecting current educational goals. It provides a learning environment that emphasizes the importance of striving for personal goals in academic achievement as well as broadening emotional and social development. Multiage is a learner-centered model of education that can effectively be a catalyst for change – one that has been proven by researchers to have many benefits when compared to the traditional graded model.

I believe that the major goal of education is to help young people develop their potential to the extent it will allow them to be successful in a rapidly changing information/service global economy and to contribute to making that society a more pleasant place to live. Huitt, 1999

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